



If God Started a Church... ...What Would it Look Like?

By Elizabeth Thomas

“Church as we know it is preventing church as God wants it,” says Wolfgang Simpson.

According to him, “the church as God wants it” is the house church, mirroring the early church meetings depicted in Paul’s letters. The house church of the future would shun the formulaic yet increasingly irrelevant megachurch trend in favor of intimate meetings nestled in neighborhoods. In *The House Church Book*, Simpson argues his case for house churches, and how they might function and multiply in modern society.

Simpson does his best Martin Luther as he submits his “15 Theses toward a Re-Incarnation of the Church”, in which he outlines the paradigm shift from congregations to couches. The theoretical framework laid is new, brave and potentially upsetting to believers—especially those in church leadership. All of Simpson’s theses unflinchingly say what many believers may already think and feel about the modern church: It’s too big, too bureaucratic, too intimidating, and too self-important, all of which make it too vulnerable.

Theses 10 and 11, however, are especially relevant in light of the economic collapse of 2009. Thesis 10 confronts the high price tag of worship services, as well as the church’s tendency to denominationally splinter over the desire to “worship ‘in the right way’”. Thesis 11 asserts that we must “stop bringing people to church, and start bringing the church to people”, meaning no more astronomical capital campaigns to build sprawling church campuses that have questionable impact on the world around them with the exception of bad traffic on Sunday mornings. Under Simpson’s model—sans rent, utilities and salaried clergy—the only overhead incurred might be the cost of a potluck meal.

As Simpson puts it, “Maybe we have fallen so in love with our own traditions that we are almost unable to truly hear and feel the world from our safe and ‘holy’ distance.” A truncated history of the church, from Constantine’s Constantinople to Zwingli’s Zurich, gives readers a reminder of humans’ tendency to lose sight of God’s will amidst doctrine and politics. Little victories along the way, like Luther’s reformation and Spener’s fellowships, brought the church closer to its original conception, but still missed the mark, according to Simpson.

The house church, as envisioned by Simpson, has many advantages over the current model: Evangelism is personal and deep, not a shallow conversion prayer chanted *en masse*. The house church facilitates growth, evades persecution, involves a higher percentage of its members, encourages accountability, solves the current

leadership drought, eradicates pastoral burnout, creates a welcoming environment for new Christians, and most of all, is centered on a Biblical model rather than man-made traditions.

Conceptually, Simpson asks the hard questions, points the prophetic finger, and challenges the status quo. Practically, however, his utopia is a contradiction in terms. While biblically based, the implementation of his vision will require just as much structure as the congregational church he denounces.

In Simpson's model, the house church's physical growth will mimic cell meiosis—each church splits once it reaches capacity (he puts the membership cap at 20), then repeats the process exponentially. House churches will serve their local neighborhoods as a part of a citywide house church network, which will occasionally gather for celebrations. The "fivefold ministry", comprising pastors, prophets, apostles, teachers and evangelists, will be the house church's "spiritual DNA", and each ministry is responsible for identifying and discipling its successors. House churches will meet multiple times per week, with scriptural teaching, discussion, prayer and worship occurring informally over dinner.

Throughout the book, Simpson reminds readers that depending on the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the minutia of who, where, when, and how will differ from church to church. If this is the case, the elaborate structure he purports to be biblically derived will lose some of its rigidity. He cannot have the best of both worlds: organic yet organized, decentralized yet tiered, inspired yet manufactured.

Late in the book, Simpson fully deviates from scripture and takes a cue from African rites of passage, suggesting house churches implement some sort of initiation to increase the perceived value of belonging. He also vaguely describes different modes of planting a house church, which seem as unnatural and forced as some of the current practices he decries earlier in the book.

Despite these shortfalls, *The House Church Book* is an important read. Simpson is one voice in a growing chorus of believers who are tired of "church as usual" and its laundry list of broken systems and ineffectual practices. Perhaps his no-nonsense tone will help even more Christians get out of the pew and into the streets where they're needed.

My Home Church Experience

Al asked me to review this book because I am a member of a house church, though not by Simpson's definition. We are not a part of a larger network, we do not have a fivefold ministry, and people in the neighborhood probably do not know about us, which means we haven't had the exponential growth described in Simpson's model. At most, we've had eight to 10 members, and currently we are four with the occasional visitor.

We originally formed because politics, corruption and stagnation had paralyzed the churches we attended. The issues ran the gamut: pride, indiscretion, infighting, cliques, financial irresponsibility, and lack of spiritual depth. Our goal was to rid ourselves of the trappings of "doing church" and just focus on scripture and what it meant for our lives—no hip songs, no bright lights, no bad sermons—just God and us.

We have been gathering for the past four years. I have probably read absorbed more scripture than I did while listening to sermons. I have also benefited from the in-the-moment discussions around a particular verse or passage. When a question arises that nobody can answer, we go to God in prayer and search the scriptures for

answers, reporting what we've found the following week. This proves that when the Holy Spirit is our counselor, we truly "need no man to teach [us]." (1 John 2:27)

Just like any church, when humans are in control, the result is imperfect. Sometimes we'd rather socialize than dig in. Sometimes we are not completely honest with each other, sacrificing accountability to avoid hurt feelings. Sometimes work, school, kids and illness force us to cancel for the week. Sometimes I miss the fellowship of a larger group. Sometimes I think we are not doing enough for Christ in our community. Most of these problems are a result of our size and our lack of faith that God can move mountains in spite of that.

Though I do not know what the ideal model for church looks like, I do know that throughout history and throughout my life, God has used many different tools to bring me closer to him. I've felt his presence in an Episcopalian Ash Wednesday liturgy, I've heard his voice in a Foursquare worship service, I've received biblical teaching at a Baptist megachurch, as well as a tiny Calvary Chapel. I've seen lives changed through messages preached by a pastor who would later be caught in infidelity, I've been turned on by the very people who led me to Christ, and I've received God's unbridled love and generosity from an atheist. God uses whatever and whomever he desires to spread his gospel. The vehicle—or the building—is inconsequential.

The House Church Book
By Wolfgang Simpson
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